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'OLD ST. NICK' OR YULE MYTHOLOGY

SANTA CLAUS as we know him today is a jolly, mythical old man who brings presents to children at Christmastime.

However, he was developed from a real person who lived about 300 A.D. He was known as Saint Nicholas.

As a boy, he became a bishop in the ancient town of Myra, now in Turkey. He was extremely kind and often went out at night taking gifts to needy people. After his death word of his good works spread throughout Europe. During the Middle Ages he became the patron saint of schoolboys who celebrated his feast day on the sixth of December. They elected a boy bishop who dressed in magnificent robes and led a parade through the streets. There was much feasting but generally the occasion was solemn. This custom eventually died out, but Nicholas remained the favorite saint with the children.

In Belgium and the Netherlands, both young and old still celebrate his feast day. Someone representing the saint rides through the streets on a donkey of white. In Germany, Nicholas appears as a hairy imp, Pelz Nichol, meaning "Nicholas in fur." Parents tell Nichol how their children have behaved during the year. Then good children are rewarded with presents and bad boys and girls receive only a bundle of twigs.

Saint Nicholas, and his habit of bringing gifts, were so popular with the children that the custom of his feast was kept.

Dutch settlers brought the custom with them to New Amsterdam (New York) and English settlers eagerly borrowed the customs and festivities surrounding the kindly Saint Nicholas. The English speaking children tried to pronounce the Dutch name (Sant Nikolaas) but when they said it quickly or excitedly it changed to Santa Claus. His appearance began to change about the same time as his name. Europeans had imagined him being a tall, slim stately person.

Washington Irving created a new picture of him when he described him as a jolly fellow wearing a broad brimmed hat, huge breeches and smoking a pipe. Irvin's Saint Nicholas rode over the treetops in a wagon and dropped presents down the chimneys.

In 1822 Clement Moore wrote the poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" for his children, which describes Santa as we know him today. The saint is pictured as a round and jolly figure with twinkling eyes, a nose like a cherry and a white beard. He puffs a stump of a pipe and rides in a sleigh pulled by eight reindeer.

The feast of St. Nicholas was celebrated for hundreds of years on December sixth. After the Protestant reformation, Saint Nicholas was replaced by the Christ Child, who was called Christkindl (Khris Kringle) in parts of Germany and Switzerland.

In many European countries, the Saint Nicholas Celebration still takes place on December 6th.

In the United States, Santa Claus' ride always takes place on Christmas Eve.

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